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THE DESCENT MOTIF  
IN THE  
AMERICAN NATURALISTIC NOVEL

Director

Examining Committee

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Naturalistic novel has been called by many people a novel of despair. It was a novel produced by currents of thought prevalent in the late nineteenth century --the scientific attitude, the theories of economic determinism, dialectical materialism, and mechanistic causation.

Since the Naturalists took a scientific view of life, they were faced with the problem of converting non-literary ideas into literary terms. It is my thesis that the symbol which they chose for the converting of one type of communication into another was the descent motif. This motif, used most overtly in Classical and Hebraic literature, is an integral part of Western Culture. The Naturalists rebelled against contemporary attitudes and organized religion to assert their views of man and his place in the world. To sum up their attitude toward life they employed their own modification of the traditional descent motif.



## THE AMERICAN NATURALISTIC NOVEL

American authors of the Naturalistic novel owe a great debt to European writers of the late nineteenth century, especially to that group of French novelists, who, under the leadership of Emile Zola, had termed themselves "Naturalists": Maupassant, Daudet, Huysmans, Goncourt. P. Martino, accepted as one of the foremost authorities on French Naturalism, offers a definition of Naturalism by making this distinction between Naturalism and Romanticism: "...ces deux mots, romantisme et naturalisme, se sont vidés d'une partie de leur sens, et très simplifiés; ils ne caractérisent plus, l'un et l'autre, dans les emplois de tous les jours, qu'une partie des aspirations romantiques ou naturalistes, ou plutôt une de leurs conséquences: l'un, un certain état d'esprit rêveur et mélancolique, ou bien orgueilleux et révolté, l'autre, une vraie fureur de montrer la nature et l'homme dans ce qu'ils ont de plus vulgaire et de honteux. Cette simplification permet de commodes antithèses."<sup>1</sup>

In order to find a common denominator for the numerous theories and ideas underlying the Naturalistic attitude, we turn to Hippolyte A. Taine's History of English Literature, published in 1863. This work chronologically bridges the gap between Darwin's Origin of the Species which appeared in 1859

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<sup>1</sup>P. Martino, Le Naturalisme français (Paris, 1930), p.6.

and Emile Zola's Le Roman Expérimental, published in 1880. I use these two works as reference points because of their great impact on nineteenth century thought.

The last half of the nineteenth century was a time of religious questioning and increasing faith in science in Europe. A wave of pessimism was sweeping France because of the Franco-Prussian War defeat, and Taine was the leader of the cult of misanthropy. His influence upon Emile Zola, the Naturalist in France, was great. Zola based his ideas on those of Taine, "the philosopher and theorist of naturalism."<sup>2</sup> According to Taine, man's life and actions are shaped, or "determined," by race, milieu, and moment. He asserted that: "It matters not what the facts may be, whether physical or moral, they always spring from causes; there are causes for ambition, for courage, and for veracity, as well as for digestion, for muscular action, and for animal heat. Vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar; every complex fact grows out of the simple facts with which it is affiliated and on which it depends...."<sup>3</sup> This ultra-scientific view of man leaves no room for morality, for man is not responsible for his actions. Taine goes on to add that, "...we are dealing merely with a mechanical problem: the total effect [of race, surroundings, and epoch] is a compound wholly determined by the grandeur and direction of

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<sup>2</sup>Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Uppsala, 1950), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Hippolyte Taine, History of English Literature, trans. Henry Van Laun (New York, 1900), p. 8.

the forces which produce it."<sup>4</sup>

A novel based on the assumptions of the philosophy of Naturalism traditionally contains one or more of the following characteristics:<sup>5</sup>

1. a sense of fidelity to reality and to observed facts
2. much space given to the description of setting (influence of milieu) with a predilection for certain settings such as
  - a. great industrial cities
  - b. slums
3. the ugly details of civilization and subjects that were once shunned (prostitution, free love, social misery), treated with boldness
4. characters which are types rather than individuals, usually from the lower socio-economic classes
5. a choice of natural phenomena with an everyday, close-to-the-soil, and often repulsive, effect on the reader
6. the denial of free will and the conception that man is controlled by the mechanistic laws of causation and the struggle for existence

By the time that the influence of European Naturalism reached America, we were engaged in a period of strife and discontent. At the end of the nineteenth century, industrialism and the rise of powerful monopolies were taking their toll in the American laboring classes. The ruthless monopolists

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<sup>4</sup>Taine, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Ahnebrink, pp. 24-25, 28-29, passim.



were rationalizing their tyranny with the "survival of the fittest" theory, and native optimism was being dimmed.

The indignant young writers who were influenced by the pessimistic European philosophies and the new scientific attitude, began to protest against the prevailing social and economic problems by portraying the most sordid details of existence.

They employed such characteristics of the European Naturalistic novel as the depiction of the lower socio-economic classes, the predilection for slum milieu, and the belief in the mechanistic controls on man's life and the natural law of the struggle for existence.

The most outstanding literary technique of the Naturalists, with the exception of the impressionist, Stephen Crane, was the use of heavy documentation of fact. This use of documentation and repetition of detail had been dictated by Emile Zola who said that "...by naturalism...is meant the experimental method, the introduction of observation and experiment into literature."<sup>6</sup> The human experiment was to be reported in a laboratory-like fashion, with no detail of behavior omitted.

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane, although replete with impressionism, is an outstanding example of the human experiment. C. C. Walcutt explains:

If we were to seek a geometrical shape to picture the significant form of The Red Badge, it would not be the circle, the L, or the straight line of oscillation between selfishness and salvation, but the equilateral triangle. Its three points

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<sup>6</sup>Emile Zola, The Experimental Novel and Other Essays, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York, 1893), p. 48.

are instinct, ideals, and circumstance. Henry Fleming runs along the sides like a squirrel in a track. Ideals take him along one side until circumstance confronts him with danger. Then instinct takes over and he dashes down the third side in a panic. The panic abates somewhat as he approaches the angle of ideals, and as he turns the corner (continuing his flight) he busily rationalizes to accommodate those ideals of duty and trust that recur, again and again, to harass him. Then he runs on to the line of circumstance, and he moves again toward instinct. He is always controlled on one line, along which he is both drawn and impelled by the other two forces. If this triangle is thought of as a piece of bright glass whirling in a cosmic kaleidoscope, we have an image of Crane's naturalistic and vividly impressioned Reality.<sup>7</sup>

The American Naturalists were influenced by the Russian Realists--Tolstoy, Doestoevsky, and Turgenev--who were Fatalists, and the French Naturalists, who based their philosophy on a Deterministic view of life.<sup>8</sup> The French novels proceeded toward their endings through a series of logical steps.

Perhaps Zola's mobs in Germinal act rashly and irrationally, but their actions are psychologically predictable. Germinal's most vividly horrible scene--the frenzied mutilation of Maigrat's body--has been logically determined by the series of outrages which the lecherous shopkeeper had visited on the miners' women.

The action in the novels of the Russian Realists usually develops through fate and circumstance. We recall that Dimitri, in The Brothers Karamazov, was charged with his father's death

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<sup>7</sup>C.C. Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis, 1956), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup>Ahnebrink, pp. 31-33, passim.

through circumstance. Dimitri had been peering in Fyodor's house when he was confronted by the old servant, Gregory. In his haste to escape, Dimitri bashed Gregory's head in and got blood on his own hands. During the night he was seen by two people. He found that Grushenka had gone to another town, so he pursued her. When the city officials learned that Dimitri had been at Fyodor's home on the night of Fyodor's death, had been seen with bloody hands, and had flown from the city, they immediately accused him of murdering his father, Fyodor.

Because of the influence upon American literature from both Russia and France, we find patterns of Fatalism and Determinism interwoven in the American Naturalistic novel. Both views of life lead to the same conclusion: the denial of free will.

Possibly because of the disillusionment brought about by the Civil War and the de-emphasis on individuality which arose with industrialism, a wave of despair at the insignificance of man in the face of social, economic, and natural forces sprang up among the American Naturalists. Stephen Crane voiced the awe and depression at the indifference of nature in his story The Open Boat: "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.....A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels she [Nature] says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situ-

ation.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most significant bases upon which American Naturalism and the Naturalistic novel rest is the nineteenth century scientific attitude brought about by the works of such men as Darwin, Spencer, Taine, and Marx, the most important of these being Charles Darwin. It is this emphasis upon the evolutionary theory that brings the Naturalist to depict man as being basically an animal, always ready to revert to the animal state. As Jacques Barzun points out in Darwin, Marx, Wagner, the Western world began to apply its own interpretations of Darwinism to every phase of life, rationalizing greed, monopoly, race hatred, and even war. "Since in every European country between 1870 and 1914 there was a war party demanding armaments, an individualist party demanding ruthless competition, an imperialist party demanding a free hand over backward peoples, a socialist party demanding internal purges against aliens--all of them, when appeals to greed and glory failed, or even before, invoked Spencer and Darwin, which was to say, science incarnate."<sup>10</sup>

It is the impact of the evolutionary theory and the great nineteenth century emphasis on science that I wish to investigate in this paper. There are, of course, numerous illustrations of this tendency in American fiction, but I choose to look analytically at four novels which are most overtly con-

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<sup>9</sup>Stephen Crane, Twenty Stories (Cleveland, 1945), pp. 231-232.

<sup>10</sup>Garden City, N. Y., 1958, p. 94. See also page 100.



cerned with the Darwinian philosophy: McTeague and The Octopus by Frank Norris, Maggie: a Girl of the Streets by Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie. I wish to investigate and define some of the characteristics which set the American Naturalistic novel apart from the European by analyzing the translation of Darwinism into American terms and techniques.

## AN ECHO FROM THE JUNGLE

One of the most outstanding and most consciously employed techniques of the Naturalistic writer was that of displaying the beast that he believed to be inherent in human nature. Ahnebrink attributes this to the influence of the French Naturalists who shared the post-Darwinian belief that man was fundamentally an animal. He explains their theory that, "Although human nature had evolved conscious behavior, under certain conditions the thin veneer of civilization cracked, and man reverted to his elemental stage."<sup>11</sup>

Precipitating this crack in the veneer were forces such as alcoholism, sex rivalry, anger, combat, shocks or crises. Oscar Cargill, who terms Naturalism a philosophy of despair, says that "The Naturalistic conception of man as a trapped animal licensed the idea that if he lived as one he was fully justified. Hence the enthusiasm for the animalistic exhibitions in life and literature which many Naturalistic writers display; hence the cult of Primitivism, which is no more than the worship of animalism for its own sake."<sup>12</sup> This is Primitivism in a very special and limited sense: not the worship of the noble savage, but the gross reduction of man to his basic

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<sup>11</sup>Ahnebrink, p. 214.

<sup>12</sup>Cargill, p. 14.

animal nature as a means of finding reality. This reality was most often pointed out by the Naturalist through a technique which we may term "the leap of the beast," the sudden appearance of the animal in man through the crack in his veneer of civilization.

One of the most excellent examples of Primitivism and the leap-of-the-beast theory in American fiction may be found in Frank Norris's McTeague. For this reason we shall focus our attention on McTeague as a prototype of the type of Naturalistic novel which emphasizes primitive animal instincts at the basis of human nature.

At the very beginning of his book, Norris paints a vivid picture of his protagonist in animalistic terms. "McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and forefinger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora."<sup>13</sup>

Notice the use of the words "carnivora," "salient" jaw, and the emphasis on the opposing thumb and forefinger. Norris tells the reader nothing of McTeague's personality or his

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<sup>13</sup>Frank Norris, McTeague: a Story of San Francisco (New York, 1962), p. 2. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

character, but about his basic physical skills. McTeague is close to his animal ancestry.

Norris confronts his protagonist with his first sexual desire. "Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring." (p. 22) In this first violent appearance of the beast, McTeague's better self rises to the rescue, and civilized man is triumphant. "It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world--the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, 'Down, down,' without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back." (p. 22)

Norris hopes to endow this passage with universality, assuming that this "old battle, old as the world, wide as the world" has been fought, or must be fought, within every man. He does attribute to man a "better self," but he goes on to show how the beast triumphs in McTeague when he becomes involved in hand-to-hand combat with his sex-rival. "The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted. He sprang to his feet with a shrill and meaningless clamor, totally unlike the ordinary bass of his speaking tones. It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant. He framed no words; in the rush of high-pitched sound that issued from his wide-open mouth there was nothing articulate. It was



something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle." (p. 172)

McTeague's "veneer of civilization" is too thin to contain the beast. Norris emphasizes the inevitability of this leap of the beast in man with the repetition of the phrase "not to be resisted," as if the very notion of resistance were futile. The fact that Norris attributes a dual nature to man, rather than a strictly animalistic one, adds nothing to his position as an optimist if the beast is "not to be resisted."

Not only is man's savage self aroused by mating conflicts and biological instincts, it also may be awakened by social pressures or by harmful indulgences. Norris points up alcohol as a precipitating factor in McTeague's defeat by the beast, and he attributes his downfall to heredity (McTeague's father was an alcoholic). "The alcohol had its effect...It roused the man, or rather the brute in the man, and now not only roused it, but goaded it to evil. McTeague's nature changed." (p. 225)

The primitive beast in man is shown by Norris not only in individual characters, but also in the actions of the mob.

For a second there was nothing articulate in that cry of savage exasperation, nothing even intelligent. It was the human animal hounded to its corner, exploited, harried to its last stand, at bay, ferocious, terrible, turning at last with bared teeth and upraised claws to meet the death grapple. It was the hideous squealing of the tormented brute, its back to the wall, defending its lair, its mate and its whelps, ready to bite, to rend, to batter out the life of The Enemy in a primeval, bestial welter of blood and

fury.<sup>14</sup>

It was the uprising of The People;  
the thunder of the outbreak of revolt;  
the mob demanding to be led, aroused at  
last, imperious, resistless, overwhelming.  
It was the blind fury of insurrection, the  
brute, many tongued, red-eyed, bellowing  
for guidance, baring its teeth, unsheath-  
ing its claws, imposing its will with the  
abrupt, resistless pressure of the relaxed  
position, inexorable, knowing no pity.<sup>15</sup>

Norris refers to the mob as a beast in itself, with two opposing natures. Both are savage, primeval, but one is the defensive beast, the "tormented brute," and one is the offensive, "inexorable, knowing no pity."

Although I have chosen Norris's character McTeague as the prototype of the human-veneered beast, Norris illustrated his basic concern with brute nature by creating one other character more vivid and still more horrible. Vandover, the protagonist of Vandover and the Brute, deteriorates over a period of time into a state of insanity known as lycanthropy, so that the victim fancies he is a wolf and crawls on all fours.

To be sure, this way of looking at man as basically a beast and a slave to his animal nature is a distinct characteristic of Naturalism. But one point should be mentioned which presents an interesting paradox. Although Norris may be acknowledged as one of the greatest proponents of this theory in American literature, the eminent critic Oscar Cargill

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<sup>14</sup>Frank Norris, The Octopus: a Story of California (Garden City, N. Y., 1931), p. 265.

<sup>15</sup>Norris, The Octopus, p. 271.

voices this problem: "What avails it to paint the victims large [as are all of Norris's brute-like protagonists] when the whole thesis of the Naturalist is the superior strength of blind force to the wills of men? Is not the defeat of an intellect by fate or chance more persuasive, from a deterministic standpoint, than the crushing of saurians? Does not the introduction of the superman throw the emphasis unduly upon fate or chance, as in British Naturalism, rather than upon heredity, the inferior biological seeds, as in the original Naturalism of the French writers? Has Norris' most distinct contribution to Naturalism made the thesis more plausible?" (Intellectual America , p. 95.) This questioning by Cargill becomes more and more significant as we delve deeper into the Naturalistic tradition in American literature. We shall go on to find more and more paradoxes that give to American literary Naturalism a distinct flavor, which sets it apart from European Naturalism and gives it a character and genius all its own.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man," *The Darwinian*, ed. Edward Stone (New York, 1922), pp. 22-23.

## EASY IS THE DESCENT TO AVERNUS

Not only did the Naturalist seek to depict the leap of the beast in man, he also chose to portray the inevitability of the appearance of his animal nature through a process of degeneration or retrogression. Obviously the Naturalists were intent on exploring the converse of the Darwinist theory: "We ...learn that man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World."<sup>16</sup> The Naturalist seemed to see man retrogressing to this ape-like stage through a series of crises.

We immediately turn again to McTeague, a man who has already experienced the power of his animal nature. The leap of the beast becomes so frequent and persistent that McTeague becomes bestial, sadistic, and cunning in his cruelty. He degenerates to the "carnivora" so completely that he derives vast satisfaction from chewing on his wife's fingertips. "McTeague, when he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest." (p. 227)

His wife Trina has been so degenerated by a life of greed and self-imposed privation that her entire personality

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<sup>16</sup>Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man," What Was Naturalism?, ed. Edward Stone (New York, 1959), pp. 28-29.



has become ugly and perverted. She comes not only to expect the gnawing of her fingertips (which had to be amputated after blood poisoning set in), but to enjoy it in some primitive and masochistic fashion. "In some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power." (p. 227)

The incidents cited above are obvious recountings of the results of physical retrogression, literal and uncomplicated. However, the American Naturalistic author carried his theme of retrogression one step farther, showing his protagonist not only descending to the basic state, but into the underworld of death. This descent is made on two levels--the literal and the figurative--and one level contributes meaning to the other. Examples of the descent motif in American Naturalism are found in McTeague, The Octopus, Maggie, and Sister Carrie.

In order for a symbol to have meaning it must have some relation to the reader. One of the most widely used and universally understood motifs in Western culture is the descent motif, which, we will recall, is employed most dramatically in Greek and Hebraic literature. The descent into the underworld (Hades) played a vital role in Greek lore, and two of the most well known descent patterns are familiar to us from Homer's Odyssey and Vergil's Aeneid.

In the Greek tradition, the underworld is regarded as a place beneath the earth or across the edge of the world

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where evil-doers are punished and the virtuous repose in the Elysian Fields. Homer, in the Odyssey, gives only a vague description of the underworld. Vergil, on the other hand, paints a vivid and graphic picture. His hero, Aeneas, in a typical mythic descent, is led into the underworld by the Sibyl of Cumae. During the descent to Hades, Aeneas is confronted by various terrors. For example: "Before the very entrance and in the very jaws of Orcus, Sorrow and avenging Cares set up their couches. There dwelt pale Disease and sorrowful Age, Fear, Hunger that persuades to evil, and squalid Poverty--forms terrible to behold--and Death and Toil...."<sup>17</sup> Aeneas and Sibyl persuade Charon to row them across the river Acheron. They pass the ferocious Cerberus, and travel through the Fields of Mourning to the Elysian Fields. Here, we remember, they meet Anchises, Aeneas's father, who shows him the souls waiting beside the river Lethe to be born again. Aeneas returns from the underworld to become the founder of the Roman Race.

Jonah, the Old Testament figure, also is a protagonist making the descent into the underworld. Trapped in the belly of a whale, Jonah says: "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head./ I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God." (Jonah 2: 5-6)

Significantly enough, these two descents also constitute

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<sup>17</sup>Edith Hamilton, Mythology (New York, 1959), p. 227.



subsequent triumphant returns: Aeneas to become the founder of Rome; Jonah to become the savior of Ninevah. These protagonists, and others traditionally involved in the descent motif, return from the underworld with a new awareness as to the meaning of the earthly life.

Maud Bodkin, in her Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, says of the descent motif in literature: "Before any great task that begins a new life and calls upon untried resources of character, the need seems to arise for some introversion of the mind upon itself and upon its past--a plunging into the depths, to gain knowledge and power over self and destiny."<sup>18</sup> Miss Bodkin attributes psychological significance to the descent into the underworld (or the "night journey")<sup>19</sup> as a preparation for the rebirth or return to the earth. But if a character is called upon to use "untried resources" and introverts, or makes this descent into the underworld, or death, and then is unable to make an ascent or to experience a rebirth, he has been dealt with by fate. This is some ironic joke played on the peace-seekers by the forces that be. Just as the ascent is significant in the light of the descent, the failure to experience a rebirth or gain an awareness is significant in light of the descent into the underworld, the journey to Death.

In the work of three American Naturalists, we may examine the descent into the underworld motif carried out in the

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<sup>18</sup>Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London, 1948), pp. 124-125.

<sup>19</sup>Bodkin, see Chapter II, p. 52.

experiences of five different characters. The underworlds pictured here are even more varying than the descriptions made by Homer and Vergil, but they all represent one ultimate--Hades, Hell, the underworld, Death, all become the same.

### McTeague

The protagonist of Frank Norris's McTeague literally descends into the Valley of Death. He is driven into the wasteland of Death Valley by his instinctive fears of pursuit. As he approaches the valley, he undergoes a progressive change in his attitude toward the landscape. At the edge of Death Valley the morning is magnificent. Fiery colors of pink, orange, and red appear over the horizon. At eleven o'clock the sun is "a disk of molten brass swimming in the burnt-out blue of the sky."<sup>20</sup> Norris gives us vivid, hellish impressions of the heat. "Everything as far as the eye could reach...lay inert, absolutely quiet and moveless under the remorseless scourge of the noon sun." (p. 307) Here the word "scourge" carries the connotation of punishment.

McTeague's journey into Death Valley begins to sound more and more like a parallel to the typical descent pattern. Later in the day he meets a snake. "For fully thirty seconds the man and snake remained looking into each other's eyes." (p. 308) Of course it is probable that one would find snakes in the barren desert country of California, but the fact that

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<sup>20</sup>Frank Norris, McTeague, p. 306. Subsequent references in the text are to the edition noted above.

Norris tells us that McTeague and the serpent looked into each other's eyes gives the snake a certain more-than-reptile quality, besides the fact that he represents the Hebraic conception of Satan.

On the second morning of McTeague's descent into Death Valley from the foothills of the Panamint Mountains "The dawn flamed and glowed like a brazier, and the sun rose a vast red-hot coal floating in fire." (p. 310) This is related closely to the hell of fire and brimstone.

As he enters Death Valley, McTeague finds that "The great mountains of Placer County had been merely indifferent to man; but this awful sink of alkali was openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant." (p. 311) The valley of Death is endowed with qualities other than physical: not only is it unbearably hot and barren, it is "iniquitous" and "malignant." The air was quivering and palpitating like that in the stokehold of a steamship." (p. 311) Only flesh quivers and palpates--the malignancy seems to be alive.

Soon the haunted McTeague begins to have illusions of "black, crawling objects" (p. 312) closing in on him. He is being pursued in a figurative sense by the fiends of Hell.

Although McTeague does not know what nameless terror is driving him deeper into Death Valley, his instincts goad him on. In the valley, his old arch-rival Marcus overtakes him and holds him at gunpoint. McTeague's mule goes crazy from loco-weed and runs away with the canteen. The catastrophe dispels the enmity for the moment, and both try to catch the mule.

When they shoot the mule, it falls on the canteen, bursting it and spilling the water over the desert floor. "We're dead men," Marcus realizes, when all hope of finding water is exhausted. (p. 321)

The enmity between Marcus and McTeague is renewed when they both remember that the mule's saddlebag contains fifteen thousand stolen dollars. On the floor of Death Valley the two men struggle, and McTeague, the brute to the end, kills Marcus. But in killing his old friend, McTeague ends his own life, for in the death-struggle Marcus has handcuffed McTeague to himself, figuratively sealing McTeague's fate.

McTeague descends into the underworld. At the literal level of meaning, he goes down from the mountains into Death Valley. On a figurative level, he descends into a Hell of fire and brimstone and alkali and into a miserable and terrible slow death. But literally or figuratively, McTeague cannot retrace his steps to the world of the living.

#### S. Behrman

In another of Norris's novels, The Octopus, a character makes a literal descent into an individual, but excruciatingly horrible, Hell. S. Behrman, agent of the octopal railroad, is drawn to Port Costa by his great curiosity and perverted joy in watching his wheat--the wheat he had, in effect, stolen from Magnus Derrick--loaded on a ship for transport to India.<sup>21</sup>

He goes on board to see the wheat being loaded into the

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<sup>21</sup>Frank Norris, The Octopus, p. 350. Subsequent references in the text are to the edition mentioned above.



hold. It flows from the elevator, down a chute with a "persistent" and "inevitable" roar. "No human agency seemed to be back of the movement of the wheat. Rather the grain seemed impelled with a force of its own, a resistless, huge force, eager, vivid, impatient for the sea." (p. 350) Behrman tastes death in a sensuous contact with the vital force of the wheat, and seems instinctively drawn to it. "S. Behrman stood watching, his ears deafened with the roar of the hard grains against the metallic lining of the chute. He put his hand once into the rushing tide, and the contact rasped the flesh of his fingers and like an undertow drew his hand after it in its impetuous dash." (p. 350)

Norris goes on to speak of the wheat's "almost liquid" texture which plunged from a "cataract" and "shifted in long, slow eddies." (p. 350) When Behrman catches his foot in a rope coil and falls through this wheat cataract into the hold, the act is reminiscent of the Greek conception of Hades as being approached over the edge of the ocean or through caverns and lakes. The ship's hold is described as hell-like: "The daylight in the hold was dimmed and clouded by the thick chaff-dust thrown off by the pour of the grain, and even this dimness dwindled to twilight at a short distance from the opening of the hatch, while the remotest quarters were lost in impenetrable blackness." (p. 350)

"'Hell,' he muttered, 'here's a fix.'" (p. 351) This last comment, uttered by Behrman, seems too ironically significant to ignore. It lends a note of bizarre humor to the

horrible account. Immediately he vainly begins to struggle, but the inexorable wheat flows on, filling the hold and covering Behrman like quicksand.

Behrman realizes his fate too late. "A frenzy of terror suddenly leaped to life within him. The horror of death, the Fear of the Trap, shook him like a dry reed." (p. 352) Like McTeague, he is "flagellated" by the wheat which beats and tears his flesh.

"Then began that terrible dance of death; the man dodging, doubling, squirming, hunted from one corner to another, the wheat slowly, inexorably flowing, rising, spreading to every nook and cranny." (pp. 353-354) When Behrman tries to cry out for help his bleeding throat and parched lips are unable to make a sound, his eyelids will not open to see the light, and he is lost. Unlike Jonah, Behrman cannot be rescued from the "belly" of the ship, and we receive the impression that there would be no Jehovah to hear if Behrman were able to utter a plea.

"The Wheat, leaping continuously from the chute, poured around him. It filled the pockets of the coat, it crept up the sleeves and trouser legs, it covered the great, protuberant stomach, it ran at last in rivulets into the distended gaping mouth. It covered the face." (p. 354) So far as the narrator is concerned, Behrman has become a nonentity. He no longer uses the personal pronoun "his"...Norris speaks of covering "the" parts of the body in a ceremony or ritual like that of covering a corpse at the pronouncement of death. The last sentence is a masterpiece of stark simplicity and horrible

finality: "It covered the face."

S. Behrman has fallen into a pit of destruction. He has fallen "off the edge of the world," so to speak, into the underworld of Death. Norris emphasizes the fact that he will not return: he covers his impersonal protagonist's face and leaves him in the underworld.

### Maggie

Stephen Crane, in his short novel Maggie: a Girl of the Streets, masterfully works out a descent into the underworld motif by showing a steady progression (or retrogression) through the streets of a city to the waterfront districts, and ultimately into the river.

The heroine, Maggie, has been rejected by her lover, Pete. In desperation she asks, "'But where kin I go?'"<sup>22</sup> "The question exasperated Pete beyond the powers of endurance. It was a direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him. In his indignation he volunteered information. 'Oh, go to hell!' cried he." (p. 70) So Maggie goes to Hell.

She leaves Pete and begins to wander aimlessly through the streets. Discovering that she attracts the lewd attention of men, she sets her face forward and pretends to have some destination.

Suddenly she came upon a stout gentleman in a silk hat and a chaste black coat,

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<sup>22</sup>Stephen Crane, Twenty Stories, p. 70. Subsequent references in the text are to the edition noted above.

whose decorous row of buttons reached from his chin to his knees. The girl had heard of the grace of God and she decided to approach this man. His beaming, chubby face was a picture of benevolence and kind-heartedness. His eyes shone good will.

But as the girl timidly accosted him he made a convulsive movement and saved his respectability by a vigorous sidestep. He did not risk it to save a soul. For how was he to know that there was a soul before him that needed saving? (p. 71)

Maggie has a chance to be rescued from her descent, but her silent plea goes unanswered.

Several months later we discover that Maggie has accepted what is obviously the inevitable, and has become a prostitute. On a particular night's journey through the city streets she is shunned by a young man in evening dress, and sneered at by a gentleman "with pompous and philanthropic whiskers." (p. 73) A businessman bumps into her and hurries on his way. "The girl walked on out of the realm of restaurants and saloons. She passed more glittering avenues and went into darker blocks than those where the crowd travelled." (p. 73) She is turned down by a mocking young man and then by a laborer. She is equally unsuccessful in attracting a young boy and a reeling drunk.

Maggie wanders farther and farther into the gloomy riverside districts of town. In front of a saloon "there stood a man with blotched features. Farther on in the darkness she met a ragged being with shifting, bloodshot eyes and grimy hands." (p. 74) Not only does the social position and physical appearance of each of these men suggest stages in a descent, the last two figures are reminiscent of the horrible



figures which Aeneas passes in his descent to Hades.

Crane says that Maggie entered the "blackness of the final block." (p. 74)

"At the feet of the tall buildings appeared the deathly black hue of the river. Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily against the timbers. The varied sounds of life, made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachableness, came faintly and died away to a silence." (p. 74) Like Behrman, Maggie has lost sight of light, of the sounds of the earth. She ends her journey in the "deathly" black river.

#### Hurstwood

Theodore Dreiser uses a technique much like Crane's in his Sister Carrie, although the descent motif is less unified and vivid. Hurstwood, Carrie Meeber's spurned and subsequently impoverished lover, seeks escape in the underworld of Death from a world which he has lost.

"At last he admitted to himself that the game was up. It was after a long series of appeals to pedestrians, in which he had been refused and refused--everyone hastening from contact." Dreiser tells us that "with death in his heart, he started down toward the Bowery."<sup>23</sup> Hurstwood begins his descent.

He decides to go to a certain gas-lamp-furnished lodging house in the Bowery via Broadway. Along Forty-second Street

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<sup>23</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (Cleveland, 1946), p. 544. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

he sees elaborate restaurants with lavish red and gold decoration and stunningly dressed people sitting down to sumptuous meals. At Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street he sees Carrie's name mockingly blazing down from a theatre marquee. In an attempt to see Carrie, he is rudely ejected by the doorman. Hurstwood has been denied an ascent.

A few days later he makes his final decision. He is standing in line with the city's scavengers waiting to be admitted to the fifteen-cent hotel which was his original destination. "There was a face in the thick of the collection which was as white as drained veal. There was another red as brick. Some came with thin, rounded shoulders, others with wooden legs, still others with frames so lean that clothes only flapped about them. There were great ears, swollen noses, thick lips, and above all, red, blood-shot eyes." (p. 552) These suggest figures from Vergil's Hades: Hunger, Poverty, Disease. As they wait in the cold night, they become restless, and are reduced to the animal state: "They looked at the closed door as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob." (p. 553) Finally Hurstwood is admitted.

It seemed as if he thought a while, for now he arose and turned the gas out, standing calmly in the blackness, hidden from view. After a few moments, in which he reviewed nothing, but merely hesitated, he turned the gas on again, but applied no match. Even then he stood there, hidden wholly in that kindness which is night, while the uprising fumes filled the room. When the odor reached his nostrils, he quit his attitude, and fumbled for the bed.

"What's the use?" he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest. (p. 554)

In utter resignation Hurstwood gives himself up to the blackness, to Death. He has gone "to rest," but the reader is aware that he will not arise and leave this cheap hotel at any future time. He will gain no awareness; he has lost all this already ("he reviewed nothing").

### The Meaning of the Motif

The key to the meaning of the descent motif as employed by these three Naturalists seems to be given by Frank Norris as he relates the wanderings of the illiterate Mrs. Hooven and her daughter Hilda in The Octopus. As a direct consequence of the machinations of S. Behrman (whom we have mentioned earlier) and the railroad monopolists, these simple immigrants have been thrust into the city with no knowledge as to how to secure food or shelter. The descent into beggary, starvation, and finally into death is shown through the technique of contrast with luxury, the same technique which Zola uses in Chapter I of Part Four of Germinal.

The details of Mrs. Hooven's path to starvation and death are not so important as Norris's comment on her ultimate and inevitable destination.

Ah, that via dolorosa of the destitute, that chemin de la croix of the homeless. Ah, the mile after mile of granite pavement that must be, must by traversed. Walk they must. Move they must; onward, forward, whither they cannot tell; why, they do not know. Walk, walk, walk with bleeding feet and smarting joints; walk with aching back and trembling knees; walk, though the senses grow giddy with fatigue, though the eyes droop with sleep, though every nerve, demanding rest, sets in motion its tiny alarm of pain. Death is

at the end of that devious, winding maze of paths, crossed and recrossed and crossed again. There is but one goal to the via dolorosa; there is no escape from the central chamber of that labyrinth. Fate guides the feet of them that are set therein. Double on their steps though they may, weave in and out of the myriad corners of the city's streets, return, go forward, back, from side to side, here, there, anywhere, dodge, twist, wind, the central chamber where Death sits is reached inexorably at the end. (pp. 303-304)

This dramatic paragraph seems to sum up the Naturalists' view of the descent. Norris tells us that the "central chamber" of the labyrinth is Death, inexorable and final. "Fate," he says, "guides the feet of them that are set therein." This somber and prophetic sentence has a Biblical tone, heightened by the sentence construction. Norris calls it Fate. Other Naturalists call it Determinism; at any rate, all the characters we have investigated have had their feet set in the via dolorosa, the chemin de la croix that leads to inexorable Death. The metaphor here, of course, is the Labyrinth of the Theseus myth: when the Minotaur was born Minos had Daedalus construct a place of confinement for him which was inescapable, the world-famous Labyrinth. Once inside the Labyrinth, one could wander forever through its mazes of winding paths without ever finding the exit. Young Athenians were taken to the Labyrinth and left to face the Minotaur. There was no escape, for running meant the possibility of colliding with the monster, and standing still meant waiting for destruction. The wise and heroic Theseus, however, entered the Labyrinth, battered the beast to death with his fists, and went on to become the King of



Athens.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Hooven, unlike Theseus, is not endowed with heroic qualities. She has no self-contained power over Death, and no recourse to the gods.

Relationships of comparative and contrasting values may be drawn between the Hellenistic-Hebraic descent motif and that pattern used by the three American Naturalists whom we have investigated. It would be too much to say that these authors are following the Greek or the Biblical pattern, but that they are using a variation of the same pattern is evident.

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<sup>24</sup>Hamilton, Mythology, p. 151

### CONCLUSION

How are all these patterns linked and how are they different? In mythology the descent into the underworld is made upon the advice of someone more far-seeing than the protagonist. Odysseus is sent to Hades by Circe, Aeneas by the Sibyl of Cumae, and Hercules by Eurystheus. In the Biblical tradition the descent into the underworld or into the wilderness is decreed or willed by God. Jonah is thrown into the depths because of God's divine will; John the Baptist and Moses are sent into the wilderness by God. Even Christ descends into Hell. The protagonist of the Naturalistic novel is sent into the underworld by some vague and mysterious Fate or Determinate, and the fall is usually precipitated by social, economic, or biological forces.

Mythological heroes descended into the underworld to gain help from some person there for their own benefit on earth. Odysseus went to find out from Teiresias how to get home. Aeneas sought advice from Anchises on how to go about founding Rome. Hercules was assigned to bring Cerberus from Hades to Eurystheus in order to win peace of mind and expiation for the death of his wife and children. The purpose of the Biblical hero's descent into the wilderness was to find strength for some earthly task, for the carrying out of God's will in the world. Jonah was prepared to be the rescuer of Ninevah after

his descent into the belly of the whale. John the Baptist went into the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ. Moses sought help to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt, and Christ descended into Hell before His ascension to Heaven. The Naturalistic descent is purposeless. The protagonist does not make the descent of his own free will, but he does (actively or passively) take his life at the end of the long descent--after he has reached the depths of despair or degradation.

Both the mythological and Biblical descent motifs are followed by an ascent. The Greek heroes returned to the earth because they were allowed to do so, because they were heroic enough to grapple with the underworld creatures and to triumph over them by physical force, or through magical devices. God's chosen returned from the wilderness with strength and wisdom from having communed with God and having triumphed over self. The Naturalistic pattern is completely devoid of any ascent. There is some appeal for help--Maggie to the man on the street, Hurstwood (in his attempt to see Carrie), and Behrman, who cries for help and struggles to see the light--but no refuge or salvation.

The adherence to the Hebraic-Hellenistic descent motif in Naturalistic literature and its deviation from the pattern are both of great significance. Hebraic-Hellenistic myth is an integral part of Western culture. Science, also, is a product of Western culture, and Naturalism embodies them both.

Because the descent motif as we traditionally conceive of it is a part of Western culture, it may be used as a universal symbol, and any discrepancies in the pattern are readily understood. Therefore we may see, by implication, that a variation in the motif represents an abnormality, or deviation, in the thought or ideology of its creator (i.e., the author).

Whereas the classical or Biblical hero descended into the underworld by choice, the Naturalistic protagonist was determined to his descent. Man was denied any will; his descent was determined by the forces around him, and he could neither reverse the pattern nor grapple with Death and return to earthly life. For the Naturalist there is no ascent. Again, by implication, there can be no self-knowledge and no new life. Once Fate has set the feet of man on the via dolorosa, the labyrinth that leads to Death, man is powerless to change his course, and he has recourse to no one or nothing.

The pessimistic assumptions at the bottom of this pattern of human life (we must remember that the Naturalist was simply to make the human experiment and report man's behavior as he saw it) account in part for the deviation from the Classical or Hebraic descent motif. Oscar Cargill says, "Naturalism... is pessimistic determinism--the conviction that we are hurried towards evil and ignominious ends whether we will or not, that degeneracy is the common history of man."<sup>25</sup>

The perplexing question to be faced at this point is

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<sup>25</sup>Cargill, p. 13.



whether or not the descent motif in the American Naturalistic novel was consciously employed by each author. My conclusion is that it was not, at least not wholly. Bodkin indicates that the descent motif of Greek and Biblical tradition is an integral part of Western culture. The American Naturalists, many of whom came from very religious families, were products of this culture, and Hellenic-Hebraic literature was a part of their education. Crane was the son of a Methodist clergyman and a zealous, pious mother. He became sceptical of his early religious training during his young manhood. Norris was born into a wealthy, cultured family, and was sent to private schools and to Europe to study. Dreiser was born in Indiana, the son of a Catholic father who was sometimes employed as a weaver and sometimes not employed at all. Dreiser was an avid reader, and worked vigorously to secure an education.

Just as nineteenth century scientific thought was a rebellion against the established religion of the times, so Naturalistic literature was a rebellion against contemporary attitudes. It followed as a consequence that the authors of this pessimistic and, at that time, shocking genre of fiction should rebel against their heritage. This rejection of the morality and ethics posed by organized religion of the nineteenth century produced the deviation in the traditional descent motif found in literature. Where organized religion preached an omnipotent God, literary Naturalism professed that there was nothing outside natural, social, and economic forces. Where religion preached self-will, Naturalism denied free-will.

Where religion told of a life after death, Naturalism depicted the utter finality of death.

Whether the descent motif was consciously employed or not, it was used by the American Naturalists, Norris, Crane, and Dreiser. This use of literary symbol took the Naturalistic novel out of the realm of the laboratory report and helped make it art. Zola said that: "The idea of experiment carries with it the idea of modification. We start, indeed, from the true facts, which are our indestructible basis; but to show the mechanism of these facts it is necessary for us to produce and direct the phenomena; this is our share of invention, here is the genius in the book."<sup>26</sup>

Since this is the fallacy of the Naturalistic method, since human life cannot be predicted, the experimenter must work with certain assumptions as controls. I maintain that Norris, Crane, and Dreiser worked with the controls imposed by religious morality and ethics as dictated by Western culture, while at the same time rebelling against them.

It is this quality of tension in the work of the American Naturalists that gives it a certain distinction. On the one hand, the rebellious artists adhered to their heritage, unconsciously employing the Hebraic-Hellenistic descent motif, but on the other hand, they distorted this myth for the purpose of setting forth their scientific philosophy.

It is this inability of the American Naturalist to completely negate his heritage that accounts for the amalgamation

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<sup>26</sup>Zola, The Experimental Novel, p. ii.

of Fate and Determinism in a single novel, the insistence that man be large and physically powerful (see discussion of Norris, page 15), and the novelist's striking use of the descent motif as a literary symbol to sum up his philosophy of despair, that gives American Naturalism a flavor, vitality, and genius all its own.

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